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# Three Mental Faculties & Guarding the Doors of the Senses

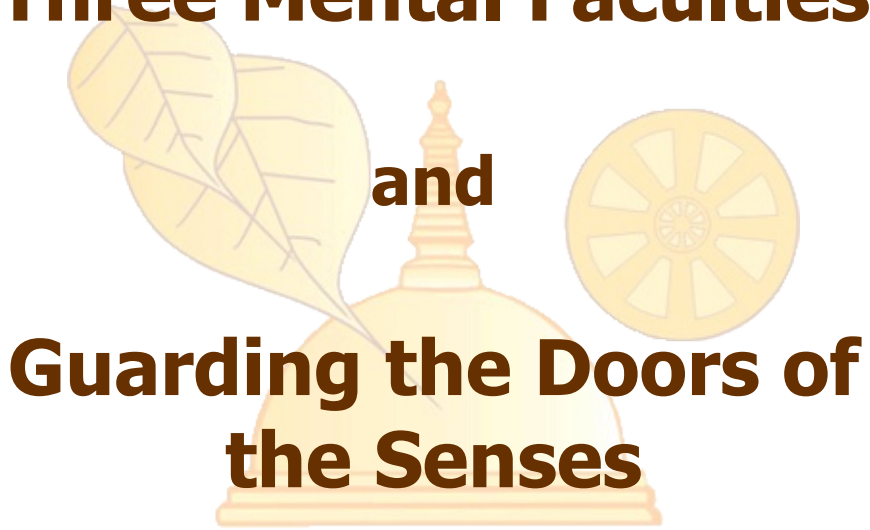
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*Two Essays by  
Dr. Elizabeth Ashby*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

# **Three Mental Faculties**



# **Guarding the Doors of the Senses**

## **Two Essays**

by

**Dr. Elizabeth Ashby**

**Buddhist Publication Society  
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# Three Mental Faculties

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## Intellect, Intelligence, and Intuition

**I**n Western Buddhist literature we often find intellect and intuition contrasted with one another, usually to the disadvantage of intellect. This is a very short-sighted view, for both are necessary for the understanding and practice of Dhamma.

The intellect is the reasoning faculty in man. It sees things in their right proportions. It investigates, analyses and discriminates. It accumulates knowledge, and is inclined to forget that “knowledge” isn’t “wisdom.” Too much stress on intellect produces mental dryness, harsh judgments, and a lack of *mettā* and compassion. Another danger is that investigation may become mere idle speculation. “Speculative views” about the subjects that the Buddha refused to define will lead us into the wilds of sceptical doubt,

with all the mental suffering that involves. Another danger is opinionatedness—the canker of clinging to views as in the case of certain Brahmins of old who declared: “This alone is the truth; all else is falsehood!”

Therefore one of the early Zen Patriarchs went so far as to say:

Do not seek after the true;  
Only cease to cherish opinions.

The cherishing of opinions leads to disputes and to vexation, for we wound one another “with the weapon of the tongue.”

Intuition is the faculty that perceives truth without having it demonstrated or explained. It feels the truth before the intellect can grasp it and turn it into concepts. Hence intuition is closely allied to the emotions, and this constitutes a danger because the emotions go hand-in-hand with the imagination, and an imagined “truth” may be mistaken for “real truth.” This happens because intuition functions on both the mundane and the transcendental plane (*lokuttara*). Our intuitions—our instinctive feelings for and against people or ideas, and our useful “hunches”—do not mean that we already possess Bodhi, the transcendental intuition that “knows according to reality.” This mundane intuition can be extremely

deceptive, and may lead to all kinds of trouble. It has to be examined in the light of a third mental faculty: intelligence. Intelligence is the ability to make skilful (*kusala*) use of the intellect. Lacking this, both intellect and intuition go astray.

All Buddhist schools recognise the part intuition must play in the attainment of gnosis—that sure certain knowing that “done is what had to be done.” The winning of Enlightenment by intellectual means, “the way of the head,” is very, very rare, though some of the Great Disciples are known to have done so.

The Zen School in particular stresses the importance of intuition. A great feature of Zen is to accept life as it comes, and to make the appropriate response. Note, the appropriate or right response. This does not mean acting on the first impulse that comes into one’s head. Most human impulses arise from greed, hate or delusion, and it is only the trained disciple who can act both spontaneously and rightly every time. Impulsive action frequently ends in disaster, as in the case of Don Quixote.

A Western writer has said that Don Quixote was “Zen incarnate.” This is a sad travesty of the facts as recorded in that glorious fiction. Cervantes has drawn the picture of a very courageous and idealistic gentleman (*hidalgo*, a man of good family), whose

intellect had been vitiated by a prolonged course of sensational fiction. He believed the romances of chivalry to be true histories, and thought it was his destiny to sally forth as a knight-errant, in order to right wrongs and relieve the oppressed. No one doubts his high motives, but as he was completely lacking in judgement he committed innumerable follies, whereby he not only suffered himself, but also brought trouble on other people. He believed that in the practice of his calling a knight-errant was above good and evil. Hence he bilked an inn-keeper and, in order to obtain the supposed "helmet of Mambrino," committed a bare-faced highway robbery.

On another occasion he imagined that a flock of sheep was a hostile army, and dashing into the middle of it, he killed seven of the creatures before the shepherd could beat him off. He was then severely cudgelled, and Sancho Panza, the loyal peasant who served him as squire, was also badly mauled. This unbalanced behaviour was typical of the poor deluded man; when he scented adventure he never waited to ascertain the facts but at once issued an arrogant challenge to the supposed aggressor, with the result that he was at once attacked and beaten up.

The pitiful thing was that the knight really had a very good intellect. Judged by the standards of his time, he was a man of considerable culture; he could

read and speak Italian, and also knew some Arabic. He could converse sensibly and even eloquently upon most subjects; it was only when chivalry was mentioned that he “slid off into madness.” His monomania was such that he never attributed his misfortune to his own stupidity, but believed they were the work of a malign enchanter who had a grudge against all knights errant. If anybody questioned the validity of his opinions he fell into a fury, drew his sword, and at once became the centre of an unseemly brawl. This may be “living by Zen” (which is open to doubt); it is certainly shockingly bad Buddhism.

If, as postulated, Don Quixote was “Zen incarnate,” why does not the story end with some kind of apotheosis equivalent to satori? Instead the knight—we call him so though even his knighthood was spurious, having been conferred upon him for a joke by a village inn-keeper—is overthrown by a bogus knight-errant, a young man from his own village, a graduate of Salamanca, newly down from the University, who with the connivance of Don Quixote’s good friends, the priest and the barber, had gone out to bring the wanderer home. The knight creeps back to die of a broken heart, first making a pathetic recantation of his follies.

It is begging the question to say that Cervantes did



not know his business. His object was to ridicule the books of chivalry, because they were silly in content and usually bad as literature. He did this supremely well, and incidentally produced one of the most tragic stories ever penned—the ruin of a noble mind.

This long digression is not an attack upon Zen. Zen is so great and so venerable that its position is unassailable. But Don Quixote is a warning against the assumption that spontaneous action is necessarily right action. It is frequently just the reverse.

What practical conclusions can be drawn? First we should remember that the Noble Eightfold Path is a discipline. The second “step” is a combination of right intention and right thought. To achieve this, mental culture is needed. This is the function of the intellect guided by intelligence. “Mental clarity” is one of the dhamma listed as occurring in good (*kusala*) consciousness. It is essential for the practice of the Four Right Efforts, i.e., to recognise unskilled mental states, and not only to “send them to their ceasing,” but also to discourage them from arising in the future; then to encourage the arising of healthy mental states, and to strengthen them when they have arisen.

It is a commonplace that intellect can be strengthened by use. Some of its dangers have already been pointed out; another danger is that it enjoys

diversity. It is always playing with ideas and forming concepts. It therefore encourages dualism and is obsessed with “the ten thousand things,” so that it never sees them in their “such-ness.” It is the function of intuitive wisdom to actually experience “suchness.” According to the Ven. Nyanaponika Thera, the intuition can also be cultivated.” [1] A careful and frequent study of this will benefit us all.

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## **Guarding the Doors of the Senses**

“He sees a material shape with the eye, and he comprehends the fetter that arises through the eye. He hears a sound with the ear, and he comprehends the fetter that arises through the ear” ... and so on for the other four senses—smell, taste, bodily feeling and consciousness. The Pali Canon is full of similar statements, and it behoves us to examine them carefully.

The fetters most likely to arise through the eyes are

sense desire and ill will. We see a rose, a chocolate or a cigarette, and immediately would like to satisfy our craving by reaching out and grasping them. The process seems instantaneous, but it is not really as simple as that. It depends on the 17 thought moments that are involved in any fresh arising of consciousness. For instance, you are walking past a row of shops, not thinking of anything in particular, your consciousness is in the state of *bhavaṅga* (merely the “life continuum”), when a flash of colour impinges on the eye-door. It is sufficiently vivid to disturb the condition of *bhavaṅga*—so you pause and have a look (adverting the mind). You then perceive a scarlet object lying on a fishmonger’s slab, it is covered with a kind of armour, has two large claws in front and a thick jointed tail. Your previous experience enables you to name it as a lobster. Then by association of ideas the word “mayonnaise” springs into your mind, and you think “How I’d like a lobster salad for supper instead of bread and cheese!” If a few grains of dust have already been removed from your eyes, there will ensue a kind of debate—“Shall I give way to this sense desire? There is nothing intrinsically wrong about a good meal. Indeed good food builds up what is called morale and is conducive to calm. My poor little ego is all the better for an occasional treat. And I could ask old So-and-so to come in for supper. That would be

practising *dāna*. Moreover a willingness to share good things keeps the fetter of avarice in check." And so forth, with a mixture of *kusala* and *akusala* thoughts until the debate is settled one way or the other, whereupon the original impression sinks back into bhavaṅga where it lies latent until some fresh association calls it into consciousness again.

For hate arising through the eye you have only to see a wasp settling on the breakfast marmalade. You automatically pick up a knife and crush it, thereby breaking the first precept with a thoroughly *akusala* deed. Minor hates arise when you see some recognised eye-sore, such as a corporation dump defiling the landscape; you at once feel ill will towards the people who are responsible for the thing. Similarly, the sight of people we dislike strengthens our aversion and builds up ill will for the future.

Sounds entering the ear-door are not likely to induce greed, though one may be tempted to sit up listening to the radio instead of going to bed or attending to some job. Where sound is concerned, desire is usually due to a pre-craving that impels one to buy a concert ticket or switch on the radio. Many people are so afraid of solitude and silence that they crave for any sort of a sound rather than sit in quietness. But for better-educated people, aversion for sound is the more likely fetter.

The howl of a jet plane can fill the inexperienced meditator with fury. One becomes distracted and breaks out into un-Ariyan speech, cursing the disturber loudly and volubly. A much better plan is to trace the origination of the sound, knowing that having arisen it must inevitably cease. Thus: "The noise is made by a plane piloted by a human being. It came from such-and-such an aerodrome, and was built in a certain factory by government order in response to the re-armament programme. Re-armament is a symptom of the 'Cold War'—[here one must beware of nourishing ill will for the people who foment war]. War, whether cold or hot, is due to greed, hate and delusion; these are the result of ignorance." By the time one has got back mentally to *avijjā* the offending plane is many miles away and the sound is inaudible. One can then calmly return to the original subject of meditation.

Where minor disturbances are concerned, such as chirping birds or barking dogs, one can follow the Buddha's advice to Bāhiya: "Thus must you train. In the heard there is only what is heard. There is no substantiality in it, no self for you to hate." This method is decidedly helpful, and can be used for putting down irritating talk.

A very present peril that enters through the ear door is gossip. Ninety nine people out of a hundred,

whatever they may say to the contrary, thoroughly enjoy gossip. The harm done to the people discussed may be negligible, but the real damage is done to ourselves. We always feel superior to the people discussed and that is the fetter of Conceit—a very heavy fetter indeed! It takes a lot of social tact not to listen, or to change the conversation, without being uncivil to one's vis-à-vis, but we can at least refrain from adding our own comments.

The fetter that arises through odours and the nose door is very subtle. There is nothing so evocative as a scent. Who can smell, or even hear the words “wood smoke” or “violets,” without some emotional repercussion? If the memory is happy, one clings to the past, and probably regrets—“departed joys, departed never to return”—as the old song has it. If the remembered incident is unhappy then the old grief comes to life. Grief (*domanassa*) belongs to the Hate group of mental states, and is both wasteful and useless. When Dido asked Aeneas to tell her about the fall of Troy, he replied: “Infandum, regina, jubes, renovare dolorem.” It is beyond my capacity to render the drawn-out misery of the Latin vowels, but roughly translated the meaning is: “You ask a shameful thing of me, O Queen, to bring to life an old sorrow.”

The Buddha's advice was “Let be the past, let be the future.” He never forbade pleasure, provided it was

lawful. He said he knew both the satisfaction and the peril that arose through the senses. He stressed the peril because the satisfaction can only be temporary, leading to renewed desire, and so productive of dukkha, and fresh becoming. The HERE-NOW is the important place where past kamma is being worked out and fresh kamma originates.

Aversion entering the nose-door is very frequent. It is wise to remove the source of the smell whenever possible for it is usually due to some impurity which, in the interests of cleanliness, ought to be removed. If this is impossible then one should remove one's own "bundle of khandhas," for we are under no obligation to endure remediable ills.

The tongue and tastes may stimulate greed, as when we go on eating after the body's needs are satisfied. This behaviour induces the fetter of sloth and torpor. One type of monk who is hard to instruct is he "who having filled his belly full, thinks only of the ease and comfort of his bed."

Aversion for food can occur when it is badly served or otherwise unappetising, and some people have an inherent dislike of cloves or onions. It is inadvisable to express this dislike when dining in company lest one's host or other guests should be embarrassed.

The body itself constitutes another sense-door.

There are two kinds of sensation associated with it; superficial (touch) and deep. The latter depends on joint and muscle movements, and on sensations arising in the viscera; these last are usually unpleasant.

Skin sensation (touch) is very important. Certain textures, such as silk and fur, have a definitely sensuous appeal, and where the opposite sex is concerned, skin texture itself comes into play.

Unpleasant deep sensations may be due to disease or to dietary indiscretions such as that produced by too much cucumber; in which case the appropriate verdict is: "Serves me right!"

Shall we attempt a short-cut to guarding the sense-doors by blocking them entirely? Tie a bandage over our eyes or fill our ears with "honey-sweet wax," as the wily Ulysses stopped the ears of his sailors lest they should hear the song of the sirens and be lured to their destruction? It would be madness to try to cross Oxford Street in this condition—in fact it is a kind of mutilation, and as foolish as the action of Origen who castrated himself so that he would no longer be tempted by "the sins of the flesh." To close the eyes and the ears completely would be to cut out all beauty from our lives. As an aside, it may be remarked that some Buddhists are afraid of beauty. This is a grave mistake, for beauty encourages healthy thoughts and



relaxes nervous tension. We can never be aware of absolute beauty. In the Platonic sense, all we know is a beautiful object, whether it be a material shape, a sound or a scent. Provided we do not covet such things, beautiful objects are helpful and inspiring. Indeed, we can get more pleasure from a picture in someone else's house than if it were in one's own. The beauty of a thing seen only occasionally strikes one afresh on each new inspection, but if actually possessed familiarity detracts from its charm.

With regard to pleasures the first principle to be applied is that of the Middle Way: neither over-indulgence nor extreme asceticism. Violent suppression of sense-desire can produce harmful psychological or even physical results in either this or some future life.

Just a few words more about guarding the eye-door. A monk in training is told to keep his eyes on the ground about 12 or 15 feet ahead (the length of the plough-yoke). This enables him to avoid hazards on the path, such as sticks, stones and snakes, but prevents him from seeing desirable objects, like pretty women or rich robes worn by other people. Within the limits of commonsense this technique can be employed in the West; it certainly cuts out the silly game of "window-shopping" so popular with many women!

Where problems of conduct are concerned Buddhism has one infallible answer. This is right mindfulness. Mindfulness makes us aware of our mental states whenever fetters arise, and we can then practise the first of four Right Efforts, and send the fetter to its ceasing. This is far from easy. Desires and aversions are so liable to become obsessions and dominate the mind. In such cases the use of a mantram may banish the intruder. *Om mani padme hum* or the Great Mantra from the Heart Sutra: *Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, Bodhi, Svaha!* The invocation with which *pansil* (the Five Precepts) opens—recited in Pali—is a fine mantram. If we take refuge in the Triple Gem we cannot go far astray.

The mind-door (consciousness being the sixth sense) is the most difficult of all to guard. Likewise it is the most important. Consciousness is on the run from morning to night, greedy for any new distraction, however trivial; hence the constant warnings in the suttas about unskilled (*akusala*) thoughts, the encouragement of which causes skilled thoughts to decline. If we attend closely to things which should not be closely attended to, trouble arises. If we constantly occupy our minds with things like lobster salad, roast duck and caviar, we are training ourselves to be gormandisers. This does not mean we should never think of food—it is a very important subject. The

cankers, *āsava*, “manias,” “outflows,” are prone to arise in an ill-nourished or sickly body. In the Far East food is regarded as medicinal—a medicine to prevent disease. For this reason food requires just as much attention as a chemist would give to making up a prescription. Good food is conducive to calm, one of the limbs of enlightenment. Once more the Middle Way is indicated.

Unwise attention is particularly dangerous when thinking about other people. If we keep remembering the faults of somebody we don't like, our aversion strikes deeper and deeper roots until a real hate arises, productive of constant woe. It is just as much a mistake to reflect too much about an attractive person, for unwise reflection can change a friendship into an infatuation leading to unhappy results.

People of the intellectual type have also to be on guard against constant conceptualising. We become obsessed with ideas, possibly quite unworthy ones, and prefer to sit down to write an article for a Buddhist magazine rather than to practise the arising of mindfulness with regard to the prosaic behaviour and unedifying conglomeration of parts that constitute the “own body.”

This business of guarding the doors of the senses sounds pretty tough, and it certainly is so. The

Buddha himself said: “This Dhamma is deep, difficult to understand,” and he never gave the impression that the Eightfold Path was edged with primroses. The loveliness of the Dhamma, “lovely in its beginning, lovely in the middle, and lovely in its ending,” is due to a quite different quality that derives from our highest instincts and aspirations. Unless we are prepared to do something about it in the way of mindfulness, we had better stop playing at Buddhism; instead take up some easy-going cult that pretends to expand or exalt what the intelligentsia calls the “human psyche”—the in-dwelling self-conceit present in all of us.

# Notes

1. Nyanaponika, *The Power of Mindfulness*. [The Wheel No. 121–122](#). [\[Back\]](#)

# Table of Contents

Title page	2
Three Mental Faculties—Intellect, Intelligence, and Intuition	4
Guarding the Doors of the Senses	10
Notes	21